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SUBJECT: POLITICAL PARTIES FOCUS ON PARALLEL VOTE
TABULATION AS ESSENTIAL FOR 2008 ELECTION

REF: BAKU 412

Classified By: Ambassador Anne E. Derse per 1.4 (b,d).

¶1. (C) Summary: During a May 1 meeting, the Ambassador briefed Azerbaijan's major political parties on our planned USD 3.2 million in assistance programs to support a free and fair presidential election. The parties welcomed the assistance, focusing on the parallel vote tabulation (PVT) as an essential tool to measure the legitimacy of the official results. Independent candidate Eldar Namazov expressed concern about the MOJ's recent move to revoke the Election Monitoring Center's registration and urged the U.S. to find a way to make the PVT work in spite of the pressure against EMC. The opposition used the rare meeting with the ruling Yeni Azerbaijan Party to castigate the GOAJ for previous flawed elections and to complain about the pre-election environment. Some opposition leaders argued that, absent political will from the GOAJ, U.S. election assistance would be a "waste of taxpayer money," a point the Ambassador firmly disputed. End summary.

¶2. (C) On May 1, the Ambassador briefed Azerbaijan's major political parties on the USD 3.2 million in ongoing and new technical assistance programs to support a free and fair presidential election in October. As in her public remarks earlier the same day, the Ambassador stressed that U.S. assistance was non-partisan and designed to support Azerbaijan's democratic institutions and processes, and not to finance political parties or politicians. Ruling Yeni Azerbaijan Party (YAP) deputy chair Mubariz Gurbanly, opposition Musavat Party Chair Isa Gambar, opposition Popular Front Party Chair Ali Kerimli, opposition Liberal Party Acting chair Avaz Temirkhan, opposition Azerbaijan Democratic Party (ADP) Chair Sardar Jalaloglu, "pocket" opposition Hope party chair Igbal Agazade, "pocket" opposition Justice Party Chair Ilyas Ismayilov, "pocket" opposition Civil Solidarity Party Chair Sabir Rustamkhanli, independent Azerbaijan Public Forum Leader Eldar Namazov, and pseudo-independent Azerbaijan Democratic Reforms Party Chair Asim Mollazade attended the event. Of the group, Gambar, Jalaloglu, Agazade, and Namazov already have declared that they will run for president; Rustamkhanli and Mollazade have told us they still are considering whether to run, and the press has speculated that Ismayilov will run. The Azadlig bloc -- represented at the meeting by Kerimli and Temirkhan -- still threatens to boycott.

A RARE OPPORTUNITY FOR DEBATE

¶3. (C) While all the party leaders were unanimous in their gratitude for U.S. engagement on the election, they - with the exception of YAP - expressed varying degrees of

skepticism about the efficacy of technical election assistance. The traditional opposition parties - Musavat, Popular Front and the Liberal Party - took advantage of the rare opportunity to meet with the ruling party to express concerns about the pre-election environment. The Yeni Azerbaijan Party complained that it faced an unfair debate, as it was the only pro-government party present at the debate. (The traditional opposition parties would disagree with his assessment, as they put Hope, Justice, and Civil Solidarity squarely in the pro-government camp.) The Ambassador noted that the U.S., Azerbaijan and all of the parties present supported the goal of holding free and fair elections, and urged the parties to focus on this goal and hold a constructive dialogue.

¶4. (C) The traditional opposition parties castigated the GOAJ for previous elections that did not meet international standards and complained that current restrictions on the media and freedom of assembly made it impossible to hold a free and fair election in October. Popular Front Party Leader Ali Kerimli said that the U.S. assistance programs demonstrated that the U.S. agrees with the OSCE that none of Azerbaijan's previous elections had met international standards. He argued that U.S. assistance programs should focus on the real issues affecting Azerbaijani elections: restrictions on the media and on freedom of assembly, and the government's lack of the political will necessary to hold truly free and fair elections. Programs that did not address these issues would not be effective, Kerimli said. ADP leader Sardar Jalaloglu and Liberal Party Chair Avaz Temirkhan later echoed this point, with Temirkhan asserting that the ruling party's domination of the electoral commissions was the most important pre-election issue, and

noting his belief that the election assistance programs would be a "waste of taxpayer money." Several other party leaders agreed that the successful conduct of the election depended entirely on the government's political will.

SUPPORT FOR A PVT

¶5. (C) The opposition parties and independent candidate Eldar Namazov expressed strong interest in the Parallel Vote Tabulation, stressing that some mechanism was needed to help assess the credibility of the official vote count. Independent candidate Eldar Namazov noted that the Ministry of Justice had recently filed an appeal to revoke the Election Monitoring Center's (EMC) registration and said the MOJ's action demonstrated that the GOAJ is concerned about the PVT (reftel). He suggested that EMC could work with a coalition of other local NGOs to ensure that the PVT is successfully implemented. Namazov also noted that, in previous elections, there has often been a difference between the official protocols and number of ballots cast; for this reason, the PVT would be very important.

¶6. (C) Musavat leader Isa Gambar and ADP leader Jalaloglu noted that the U.S. had funded an exit poll in the 2005 parliamentary election, asking why the U.S. was not doing so again this year. Gambar recited the opposition's complaints about the 2005 exit poll and hinted broadly that the U.S. had declined to fund another exit poll because the 2005 exit poll results were invalid. Stressing the necessity of some sort of method to assess the legitimacy of the official results, both Gambar and Jalaloglu asked for more information on how the parallel vote tabulation (PVT) would be conducted and used to assess official results.

¶7. (C) After the DCM provided details of the PVT, the Ambassador said that exit polls and PVTs were just a few of the many tools that could be used to assess the conduct of an election. The U.S. sought to introduce new tools through its technical assistance programs and, for this reason, planned to introduce the PVT to Azerbaijan this year. She added that the pre-election environment - including the many serious problems raised by the party leaders - was also an important benchmark by which the U.S. and the international community

would judge the conduct of the October election.

PROGRAMS ARE NOT A WASTE OF MONEY

¶8. (C) The Ambassador pushed back on Temirkhan's assertion that the election assistance programs would be a "waste of taxpayer money." She said that the U.S. understands that high-level advocacy and strong government-to-government dialogue also are needed to promote the conditions necessary for free and fair elections and would continue to be deeply engaged in both. Repeating that U.S. assistance programs support democratic processes and institutions, she argued that assistance to government bodies such as the Central Election Commission was central to our efforts. In response to concerns about planned U.S. human rights training for police officials, the Ambassador stressed that such training was essential to ensure that Azerbaijani people are able to exercise their right to assemble and peacefully express their views. She also noted that our overall election assistance was being provided in the context of a larger international effort that included the OSCE, Council of Europe and EU and urged the party leaders to consider our programs as just one part of a broader initiative.

COMMENT

¶9. (C) The traditional opposition leaders and Eldar Namazov identified the parallel vote tabulation as the most important element of our election assistance program. In our view, this also is the most important element of our assistance, as it will provide real-time, nonpartisan information on the conduct of the ballot counting throughout the country. We continue to engage the GOAJ on the issues surrounding EMC's registration and are pressing for a timely resolution. We also are exploring other avenues to conduct the PVT, should the GOAJ stand firm in its objections to EMC or NDI decides it no longer wishes to conduct this monitoring effort.

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